The Hollow Travesty of National Culture: Our Tryst with Destiny

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Abstract: *Partha Chatterjee argues in The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question that nationalists created a dichotomy revolving around 'ghar' (home) and 'bahir' (world) which could be transposed into an analogous dichotomy of outer and inner spheres of sovereignty. The outer sphere is the domain of statecraft, political action and material interest and it is here that the superiority of the West is recognised. The inner sphere of sovereignty is concerned with the spiritual. It is the repository of cultural tradition and women embodied it. Women are thus transfigured into a cultural sign rather than as a material being with social and political needs. The denial of agency and subjectivity is an effect of the dialectical process where the material being of womanhood is transformed into a disembodied sign. The colonial regime thus embarked upon a process of codification backed by a seemingly rigorous and empirical scholarship which determined that identity in India was crystallised on the poles of two essential units – that is religious community and caste. The womanhood which signified an authentic national tradition in the discourse was associated with a reformulated Hinduism which retained the principle of communal difference which was challenged by the colonial state and the minorities.*

On the other side of the spectrum, we have something like the 'Dasi episode' in Raja Rao's Kanthapura which hinges upon the narrated conflict between the shopkeeper of Kanthapura and the phantasmagoric Muslim character Rahman Khan. It undermines the Gandhian ideology and reveals its communal underbelly. Although the Nation is meant to stand for horizontal comradeship, inequality remains a daily occurrence in its body. In conceiving its overarching ideologies it places the dominant group at the center pushing the minority population to the periphery. In The Pitfalls of National Consciousness, Frantz Fanon argues that nationalism instead of being the embracing crystallisation of the people becomes a hollow travesty in which nation is passed over for the race and the tribe is preferred to the state. Rahman Khan is thus sentenced to six months imprisonment, a symbolic incarceration which underlines the anxiety with regard to Muslims. Dasi is a pawn in the conflict since the charge laid against Rahman Khan was that he tried to murder Subba Chetty as he had stolen his mistress. These kinds of limitations reduce nationalism to a monolithic ideology inadequate for human beings given to inherent multiplicity and seeming contraries that needs to be synthesised through a process of soulful negation to create the wholesome person.

Key Words: *Nationalism in popular culture; Tagore; N. S. Madhavan; Multilateral imagination; Colonialism and nationalism.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

The nationalist project espoused by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee in *Anand Math* was to produce the perfect man who was learned, agile, religious and refined than the agnostic and profoundly materialistic Western concept of culture. The concept of dharma reconciled a philosophy of spirit with a rational doctrine of power which regenerates national culture embodying an unrivalled combination of material and spiritual values. This contradiction served as a basis for divergent political programmes, as an emphasis on modern meant arguing for continuation of colonial rule, sharing of power between modern elite and colonial officials. Emphasis on state action, on the other hand, was to reform traditional institutions which assumed the Oriental as passive, non-autonomous and in need to be acted upon by others. An emphasis on the national elements of culture meant the growth of fundamentalist cultural elements, usually of a communal type. In the present, nationalism had become a matter of ethnic politics for which people in Third World killed each other in wars between regular armies, sometimes distressingly in protracted civil wars and by technologically sophisticated and virtually rambunctious acts of terrorism. Nationalism is viewed as an elemental, unpredictable force of primordial nature threatening the orderly calm of civilised life.

It is difficult to trace the origin of caste and there is lack of unanimity among scholars about the emanation of caste. According to Vedic literature, Brahma created caste as the Brahmans originated from his mouth, the Kshatriya from the arms, the Vaishya from the thighs and the Sudra from the feet of the creator. The origin of four castes from four different parts of the creator's body is symbolic that indicates the works performed by the castes. The racial

theory propounded by Herbert Risley in his seminal work *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal* provides that the initial clash between Aryans and non-Aryans gave birth to the division of society between superiors and inferiors based on complexion, strength as the determining factors of superiority. The caste body is the site where the inequalities based on purity and pollution are reproduced. The articulation of hidden histories of the collective experience of hurt and humiliation testifies to the oppression of the group moving beyond the self and forging link between the self and the material conditions which challenges the hegemonic power structure and the text is transformed into a vibrant literary space where registers of the aesthetic is formulated which is governed by the painful task of portraying the minority world which is filled with painful and macabre events. The Dalits and the castes belonging to the lower echelons of society are constantly humiliated, a profound crisis which besets the self which Cornel West has described as "ontological wounding." Dalit subalternity is not located within the colonial structure of the coloniser and colonised but within a caste based social and cultural structure where the Dalits are the upper caste Hindu's "other." The texts representing the minorities' experience delineate a culture where respatialisation of centre and margin happen with the articulation of marginality with interlocking oppressive social relations which calls for an understanding of literature based on what Martha Nussbaum calls the "compassionate imagination" which results in not only acknowledging the excluded but also listening to their language.

2. ENCYCLOPAEDIC NATIONALISM AND THE ONTOLOGY OF LOVE:

Tagore viewed nationalism as something that is imaginary to which human beings have to readjust their minds by being inclusive and imaginary so that the fellowship of our species do not stop at a specific geographical locale. Tagore's vision of a free India, free from the fetters of nationalism as well as religious and racial orthodoxy seeking a common destiny with the rest of mankind constantly evolving towards a global society is expressed in a poem called "Where the Mind is without fear" which was written in the form of a supplication in *Gitanjali.* Rabindranath Tagore believed that India's immediate problems were social and not political. In his short story "Purification", Kalika badgers her husband for not being fervent enough but she does not come to the rescue of a municipal sweeper who is assaulted by a group of orthodox Hindus just as he is an untouchable. The messianic poet conceived that India needed an evolution from within and a thought impetus experienced by Europe during the Renaissance that broke up the feudal system and the tyrannical conventionalism of Latin Church was the remedy for a country languishing on the 'dry sand bed of dead customs.' In *My Reminiscences,* Tagore humorously recollects that in the servant's quarter he was warned with a solemn face of the perils of transgressing the circle as the poet encapsulates that he would tear down the customary barriers between people and establish equanimity with various religious groups through regeneration of the spirit as he would feel muffed by any confining circle or the thorny hedges of exclusion that stood on the way to the formation of a larger human community.

Satyajit Ray in *Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne* does not portray the sublime linearity of film narratives which conflicts with the tortuous and contradictory unfolding of history as realist assumptions pervade the folk tale and invite the reader's participation in working out the logic of the narrative which points metonymically to the innocent scopic position oscillating between two binary worlds. Thus the audiences are carried into a world in which they experience chronotopic displacement, the reversal of the spectator's gaze and the collapse of our common sense belief in the reality of the quotidian world and yet remain fastened to it. When Goopy appears on screen he is seen carrying a tanpura which is a signature of the sophisticated world of classical music which is incongruous with his rustic accent and peasant clothes. The village Brahmins demonstrate the superiority with which claims to their particular terrain could be dismissed. The King who banished Goopy is a qualified patron and he would not accept a peasant boy's grotesque imitation of reserved grace. Goopy and Bagha who have been banished from their respective kingdoms are released incidentally from the disciplinary bind of apprenticeship till the otherworld intervenes to confirm the historical place of man who chooses to walk out of history as they can fulfil their wish like the availability of sumptuous foods which otherwise had to be produced through exhausting labour where the people of low castes and class are deracinated as the product he produces is independent of his self but with which there is the two fold sense of identification and loss through the upper caste's centralisation of the means of production (which allows them to monopolise all advantages) and socialisation of the sellers of labour power. The auteur offers us with a world where the nexus between men is not one of callous cash payments and the vestiges of the heavenly ecstasies of philistine sentimentalism, chivalrous enthusiasm has not been drowned into the icy waters of egoistical calculation but he also reminds the audience that these idyllic village communities had been the solid foundation of Oriental despotism which restrained the human mind within the smallest possible compass making it a tool of superstition.

Satyajit Ray also integrates the ghosts into the narrative whose stories are legion in Bengal. It is carefully constructed and not anthropologised to find a place in the historian's narrative which is the project of writing non-European history in subaltern terms as he demands from the discipline of narrativising the 'story of non-rational other' in other's own terms. British imperialists used the discipline of history as they were emerging in nineteenth century to subjugate people who had 'myths' but no history. The astrological columns in newspapers, the practice of superstition that surrounds the activities of sports fans create a sense of the past under which we can treat them as intelligible to us.

Dipesh Chakrabarty in *Provincialising Europe* insists on returning the gaze, making a gesture of inversion as where Europe sees inadequacy, this new history will read plenitude.

Most of the films on Partition like *Hey Ram, Pinjar and Gadar* project a narrative of Muslim bloodlust and Hindu trauma juxtaposed with Mahatma Gandhi's politics of Muslim appeasement and uses the lacerating period of Partition as background for melodrama about love and sacrifice. Ray does not attempt to instil a reconstructed divisive past in India's collective memory but rather integrates the minorities through his ecumenical viewpoint into the invented nation space. In the final scene when the king's daughters are getting betrothed to the folklore heroes (who have stopped the eternal reciprocity of tears), the background lights up as Ray uses colour cinematography through synchronised monochrome films to suggest the poetic passage of night into daylight. We could hope that nations would rise out of the storms and reach Tagoresque one world through recurrent dialogic process as if they are great swells at sea rising out of the depth of despair and finally arriving at a calm tranquility on the shore of life.

2. N. S. MADHAVAN'S LITANIES OF THE DUTCH BATTERY:

In order to move forward in my discussion on the fragility of Indian nationalism (or, whatever constructs the sense of such a fervour), it would help to look at N. S. Madhavan's debut (and so far, only) novel, *Lanthan Batheriyile Luthaniyakal* (*Litanies of the Dutch Battery*). Published first in 2003 in Malayalam, the novel is set in the politically charged atmosphere of 1950s Kerala. In a way, Madhavan's novel is both postcolonial and historical. Thanks to the miscegenation, Kochi has a distinct cultural identity for itself. However, this culture suffers today as it is at loggerheads with the dominant Hindu tradition of Kerala. When compared to the entire narrative of ancient India as a whole, Kochi has a short and recent history. Yet the small town holds a microcosm of the world. There are Jews, tradesmen from the Kutch, Konkanis who fled persecution by the Portuguese, descendants of the Portuguese, the Dutch, the French, the English and even Central Asians who have adapted themselves to the region. Through the novel, the writer suggests a make belief construct of history, and into the character's idiosyncratic yet disarmingly self-deprecating view of life, slides in images of legends, fantasies, myths, facts and images. An example of this is the retelling of the Coonankurishhu (Coonan Cross, or the Hunchback Cross) story by Santiagu. Historically, the story goes that in the mid-seventeenth century, as the Portuguese were trying to proselytize the Saint Thomas Christians (the Syrian Christians, a sect of the religion endemic to Kerala), a large group of them came together under the tall cross in Mattanchhery to swear an oath against joining the new faction of Christianity. This resulted in a competition of sorts where the neo-converts who were under the influence of the Padroado of the Portuguese Crown, and the native Syrian Christians, who took immense pride in their heritage as descendants of the upper caste Namboodiris of Kerala, tied a rope to the cross and started pulling it from either side. The latter side eventually won by bending the cross to their favour, mainly in part due to their large number, yet they chalked it to the power of their faith. In the novel, Santiagu, a Latin Christian, a descendant of the then neo-converts, retells the story in a different manner. According to him, the Original Cross of the true Christian cannot be bent by mere factional disputes. What bent the cross was Chinna Thampi Annavi standing in front of the cross and singing a heart rending song dedicated to Jesus. Annavi, who as of today is known to have founded and established the regional art form of Chavittunadakam in Kerala, succeeded in breaking the Cross' heart, as a result of which, it bent to him. Thus the ethos of the native Christian identity within the work is deeply related to their view of history.

4. CONCLUSION:

Much like Ray, Madhavan employs myths and folklore to take India's collective memory beyond its immediate colonial past. This, in turn, directly affects the way in which Indian nationalism is presented in the text. Unlike the usual narratives, the characters in Madhavan's novel thank their colonial past for the wonderful benefits it brought: While Edwin thanks Vasco da Gama for introducing Christianity which reformed their identities from that as untouchables, slaves to the upper-class Hindus, Raghavan Master thanks the invaders for their linguistic influences (even going so far as to state that without the Dutch, Malayalis would not have the most important of all necessities – since 'kakkoos', meaning commode or toilet in Malayalam, comes from the Dutch 'kak haus'). At various other points, the influence of the colonisers on the cuisine is also noted as it was the Portuguese that introduced the large onions ('sabola') and dried green chilli to Kerala, both of which are ingredients integral to the preparation of 'sambar' and 'aviyal'. The nationalistic idea gets further trumped when an inebriated Santiagu narrates the story of Jawaharlal Nehru and V. K. Krishna Menon receiving the news of Chinese soldiers on the border through his drunken, impromptu Chavittunadakam act. The novel is set in the island of Lanthan Bathery (Dutch Battery), an island without a single bridge. Its narrative of isolation is provided through a description of its very obliteration at the altar of politics. The island is at once both fictional and divorced from the mainland, but using history as its bridge, it connects the emotional crises of its characters with not just the immediate world outside, but also the readers themselves.

Throughout the novel, unlike his characters, the writer presents the readers with various instances from history that highlights the brutal nature of the colonisers. From the Dutch commander, Heindrik Adriaan van Rheede tot Drakestein's persecution of Catholics in the seventeenth-century, to the Australian soldiers deputised by the British during the Second World War who went about the town, drunk, looting shops and molesting women. To the author,

the acts of the colonisers are anything but gratifying. This act of the author must be seen in conjunction with the very title of the novel. While the title in English might seem odd unless you realize that 'Dutch Battery' is the name of a place, in Malayalam, the title takes on an added significance when you realise that all the words of the title are Malayalam loan words of Portuguese origin --- Lanthan comes from *holandes*, meaning Dutch, Batheriyile comes from *bateria*, meaning a battery, as in a set of guns and Luthiniyakal, the plural for Luthina, comes from *ladainha*, meaning litany. From the very title of his novel, the author presents to us the picture of a dynamic present which borrows its identity from its colonial history. Like the *machwas* that keep on moving the islanders to and from the mainland, the narrator too is used as a vessel, carrying the story of the islanders towards the reader, using examples from history to provide an aura of authenticity. As J. Devika rightly points out, Madhavan, in order to reclaim the multicultural legacy of Kochi, constructs an exotic allure to the history by presenting it through the perspective of the dominant other. This use puts into question the aura of nationalism that haunts the story especially in those instances when it becomes self-aware of the dynamic present it presents to us. Dynamic, because the immediate temporal setting of the novel was during Kerala's most radical political change, the rise of the first Communist government in India. The references to the rising Naxalite movement in the state provides an interesting articulation of the hegemonic power structure, mainly formed by racial and religious identities, that determines the ever-changing answer to the unchanging question behind the nationalistic ethos: what is one's duty to their own nation?

Rajesh Rajamohan draws a comparison between the Orthic School of art in Kochi and the art of the novel itself as he calls the narrator, Jessica, a "non-intrusive observer" who lets the "awareness come to her and reflects it back to the reader when it does." Ambika Ananth notes in her review of the novel that at its end, the novel reduces its narrator into a mere victim. She slips into insanity as a result of her isolation because she dared to identify her molester, the Mathematics teacher at her school who goes on to commit suicide, all of which only increases the islanders' feeling of hatred towards her. Even this tale of victimisation is, like all other events mentioned in the novel, taken to present a narrative that employs the history of life in Kochi to deliver redemption to the inhabitants of a fictional island on the Vembanad. The island could in fact be any place given the story and its treatment of the narrator. For Madhavan, it is the history of a place that decides both the way it treats its inhabitants and the way it answers the aforementioned question that determines nationalism. If we are to take the novel based on what it gives us on these issues – for better or for worse, history, though unintentionally, eventually repeats itself.

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